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Fool's literature

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Fool's literature, allegorical satires popular throughout Europe from the 15th to the 17th century, featuring the **fool** (*q.v.*), or jester, who represented the weaknesses, vices, and grotesqueries of contemporary society. The first outstanding example of fool's literature was *Das Narrenschiff* (1494; "The Ship of Fools"), a long poem by the German satirist **Sebastian Brant**, in which more than 100 fools are gathered on a ship bound for Narragonia, the fools' paradise. An unsparing, bitter, and sweeping **satire**, especially of the corruption in the Roman Catholic church, *Das Narrenschiff* was translated into Latin, Low German, Dutch, and French and adapted in English by **Alexander Barclay** (*The Shyp of Folys of the Worlde*, 1509). It stimulated the development of biting **moral** satires such as Thomas Murner's poem *Narrenbeschwörung* (1512; "Exorcism of Fools") and Erasmus' *Encomium moriae* (1509; *In Praise of Folly*). The American writer **Katherine Anne Porter** used Brant's title for her *Ship of Fools* (1962), an allegorical novel in which the German ship *Vera* is a microcosm of life.

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...inaugurated a genre of "fool" literature. (The best-known representative of this body of work is probably Desiderius Erasmus's *The Praise of Folly* [1509].) One of the most versatile writers of popular plays, short stories in verse, and narrative and satirical poems was the Nürnberg shoemaker and Meistersinger Hans Sachs...

fool

Fool, a comic entertainer whose madness or imbecility, real or pretended, made him a source of amusement and gave him license to abuse and poke fun at even the most exalted of his patrons. Professional fools flourished from the days of the Egyptian pharaohs until well into...

Das Narrenschiff

Das Narrenschiff, long poem by Sebastian Brant, published in 1494. It was published in English as *The Ship of Fools*. The work concerns the incidents on a ship carrying more than 100 people to Narragonia, the fools' paradise, and is an unsparing, bitter, and sweeping satire, especially of the corruption...

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Sebastian Brant
John Banim

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Alternative Title: *sottie*

Sotie, also spelled **Sottie**, short satirical [play](#) popular in France in the 15th and early 16th centuries, in which a company of *sots* (“fools”) exchanged badinage on contemporary persons and events. The *sots*, wearing the traditional short jacket, tights, bells, and dunce cap of the [fool](#), also introduced acrobatics and farcical humour into the sketches. At first the sotie was used as an introductory piece to mystery and [morality](#) plays. Developing into an independent form, soties were created and staged by the Clercs de la Basoche, an association of law clerks; the [Enfants sans Souci](#), a group of nobles; and other, more permanent companies. [Pierre Gringore](#) became the preeminent sotie dramatist. The sotie was openly satirical and was used as a weapon in political battles. It was forbidden in the 16th century and replaced by more general forms of [satire](#).

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...in triple bills: first a sotie, a slight, sometimes satiric, sketch; next a moralité (morality play), a didactic and often allegorical piece; and finally a farce. Some 150 farces have survived from the 15th and 16th centuries. Most are of fewer than 500 lines and involve a handful of characters...

fool

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Pierre Gringore

Pierre Gringore, French actor-manager and playwright, best known as a writer of soties (satirical farces) for Les Enfants Sans Souci, a famous medieval guild of comic actors of which Gringore was for a time the second dignitary. Mère Sotte...

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German poet

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Alternative Title: Sebastian Brandt

Sebastian Brant, Brant also spelled **Brandt**, (born 1457, [Strassburg](#) [now Strasbourg, France]—died May 10, 1521, Strassburg), satirical poet best known for his *Das Narrenschiff* (1494; *The Ship of Fools*), the most popular German literary work of the 15th century.

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Brant studied in Basel, where he received his B.A. in 1477 and doctor of laws in 1489; he taught in the law faculty there from 1484 to 1500. In 1500, when Basel joined the [Swiss Confederation](#) (1499), he returned to Strassburg, where in 1503 he was made municipal secretary. [Maximilian I](#) appointed him imperial councillor and count palatine.

Brant's writings are varied: legal; religious; political (in support of Maximilian, against the French and Turks); and, especially, moral

Sebastian Brant

QUICK FACTS



(adaptations of the aphorisms of Cato, Faceto, and Freidank). His chief work, however, is *Das Narrenschiff*, an allegory telling of a ship laden with fools and steered by fools setting sail for Narragonia, the “fool’s paradise.” The ship allegory is not sustained; instead Brant presents more than 100 fools representing every contemporary shortcoming, serious and trivial. Criminals, drunkards, ill-behaved priests and lecherous monks, spendthrifts, bribe-taking judges, busybodies, and voluptuous women are included in this unsparing, bitter, sweeping satire. Brant’s aims are the improvement of his fellows and the regeneration of church and empire. The language is popular, the verse rough but vigorous; each chapter is accompanied by a woodcut, many ascribed to Albrecht Dürer; they are beautifully executed but often only loosely connected with the text. Brant’s work was an immediate sensation and was widely translated.

BORN
1457

DIED
May 10, 1521 (aged 64)

NOTABLE WORKS
“Das Narrenschiff”

Two English versions appeared in 1509, one in verse by Alexander Barclay (*The Ship of Fools of the Worlde*) and another in prose by Henry Watson, and it gave rise to a whole school of fool’s literature. Yet Brant essentially looks backward; he is not a forerunner of the Reformation nor even a true humanist but rather a representative of medieval thought and ideals.

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Sebastian Brant (1458–1521), born at Strassburg, spared no class in his epic on human stupidity, the *Narrenschiff* (Ship of Fools). But it was in the thriving cities of southern Germany, as yet little affected by Italian humanism, that late Gothic culture reached magnificent heights in...

fool's literature

...poem by the German satirist **Sebastian Brant**, in which more than 100 fools are gathered on a ship bound for Narragonia, the fools’ paradise. An unsparing, bitter, and sweeping satire, especially of the corruption in the Roman Catholic church, *Das Narrenschiff* was translated into Latin, Low German, Dutch, and French...

Das Narrenschiff

>**Sebastian Brant**, published in 1494. It was published in English as *The Ship of Fools*. The work concerns the incidents on a ship carrying more than 100 people to Narragonia, the fools’ paradise, and is an unsparing, bitter, and sweeping satire, especially of the corruption...



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